

American Punk: The Relations between Punk Rock, Hardcore, and American Culture

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ABSTRACT

Punk culture has its roots on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite continuous cross-fertilization, the British and the American punk traditions exhibit distinct features. There are notable aesthetic and lyrical differences, for instance. The causes for these dissimilarities stem from the different cultural, social, and economic preconditions that gave rise to punk in these places in the mid-1970s. In the U.K., punk was mainly a movement of frustrated working-class youths who occupied London's high-rise blocks and whose families' livelihoods were threatened by a declining economy and rising unemployment. Conversely, in America, punk emerged as a middle-class phenomenon and a reaction to feelings of social and cultural alienation in the context of suburban life. Even city slickers such as the Ramones, New York's counterpart to London's Sex Pistols and the United States' first 'official' well-known punk rock group, made reference to the mythology of suburbia (not just as a place but as a state of mind, and an ideal, as well), advancing a subversive critique of American culture as a whole. Engaging critically with mainstream U.S. culture, American punk's constitutive other, punk developed an alternative sense of Americanness.

Since the mid-1970s, punk has produced a plethora of bands and sub-scenes all around the world. This phenomenon began almost simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic—in London and in New York, to be precise—and has since spread to the most remote corners of the world. There has always been a significant degree of transatlantic cross-fertilization within the genre. And yet, the U.K. and the U.S. each have their own punk tradition, which is to say, the same punk spirit manifested itself in different ways relative to the dominant cultures in these respective places. These traditions are not fundamentally different, yet each does exhibit some distinguishing features.

In public perception, however, punk is widely considered to be as British as beans on toast, and most academic research has thus focused on the developments in the U.K., in particular the rise of the Sex Pistols. With the commercial breakthrough of bands such as Green Day, Rancid, NOFX, and the Offspring in 1994, however, American punk eclipsed everything that had come before. At the time, the mainstream music world mistook these acts as reincarnations of British bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Clash, unaware that they were in fact products of two decades of indigenous U.S. punk that began with the Ramones and the proto-punk and garage bands of the late 1960s and early 1970s (the Stooges, the Dictators, the New York Dolls).

It should be noted that the goal of this article is not to separate or nationalize the international punk community. It rather asserts how factors such as local-

ity, geographic separation (especially pre-internet), and cultural, historical, and socio-economic differences in the respective dominant cultures have left their marks on the scene at large. I would moreover argue that despite punk's international character and continuous cross-pollination there, is something distinctly American (or, perhaps, anti-American; after all, punk tends to present itself as a counterculture) about U.S. punk. I should add that the aforementioned American proto-punk bands also had a massive impact on the early British scene. In fact, it was the New York Dolls' short-time manager Malcolm McLaren who 'invented' and managed the short-lived Sex Pistols (cf. Goddard 381). While the Sex Pistols were clearly musically influenced by American proto-punk groups, their 'sound' was unmistakably British (cultural references, vocalization, lyrical subject matter, etc.), which suggests that locality and a band's wider cultural and social environment are critical factors in shaping a group's artistic identity.¹

In his autobiography, the Mancunian singer and The Smiths' frontman, Steven Patrick Morrissey, writes that he, upon first encounter, was "fascinated to discover that the Sex Pistols loathe and despise everyone on earth *except* the New York Dolls" (115). He has also noted that the latter were "very true to their environment" (qtd. in Goddard 287), which is an important observation, particularly with regard to the present article. Elsewhere the singer is quoted saying that "it is nice to see that the British have produced a band capable of producing atmosphere created by the New York Dolls" (qtd. in Goddard 380). The Sex Pistols definitely looked to the U.S. scene for inspiration and found the music of bands such as the Stooges and the New York Dolls, but their first singles, "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen," spoke a different language. These songs explicitly dealt with social problems in the U.K., and in terms of diction, they were distinctly British, too.²

The Sex Pistols' U.S. American counterpart was a weird-looking four-piece group from Queens, New York, called the Ramones, who are commonly recognized as the first American punk band. As a matter of fact, they formed before the alleged pioneers of punk, the Sex Pistols, and released their self-titled debut album one-and-a-half years before the latter released theirs. *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* (1977) remained the Sex Pistols' only official studio album, whereas the Ramones went on to record thirteen more. Moreover, it should be noted that the underground music magazine from which the punk movement derived its name was also based in New York. *Punk* magazine and New York's CBGB club are widely considered the linchpins of early U.S. punk culture.

The aesthetic and thematic differences between British and American punk are best explained by reference to the different cultural backgrounds from which the Ramones and the Sex Pistols emerged. The Ramones—all four founding members have, alas, already passed away³—grew up and were socialized in a com-

¹ One of punk's most notable musical predecessors in the U.K. was pub rock, a back-to-the-basics form of rock 'n' roll that was a reaction against the flamboyance of glam rock and the sophistication of progressive rock.

² Consider, for instance, the title of their only studio album, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*.

³ Dee Dee Ramone (bass), 1951-2002; Johnny Ramone (guitar), 1948-2004; Joey Ramone (vocals), 1951-2001; Tommy Ramone (drums), 1949-2014.

pletely different cultural environment than the early U.K. punks. Queens, New York, was not London, and American's culture of 'bubblegum' pop, suburbia (as in 'suburban utopia'), and make-believe happiness contrasted glaringly with the bleak reality of a war-torn, ramshackle post-WWII Britain. By the mid-1970s, the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s had faded away, leaving behind an air of disenchantment. High unemployment rates and poverty plagued the British Isles. Tension between the autochthonous population and the rising number of immigrants from other Commonwealth countries was on the rise and often escalated to violence. As a result, British society became increasingly conservative, holding on to traditional values symbolized by the country's royal figurehead, Queen Elisabeth II. "God save the Queen/She ain't no human being," the Sex Pistols sang in 1977. "There is no future / In England's dreaming" ("God Save the Queen").

These cultural differences manifested themselves aesthetically and lyrically in the respective punk traditions. The Ramones' music was, like the Sex Pistols', raw, stripped-down, and fast, but it adhered more to the hackneyed conventions of 1950s and 60s pop and rock 'n' roll, which made their music sound more light-some. Moreover, it was less political—or at least not as overtly so. The Ramones' uniform look, which was somewhat reminiscent of iconic 1960s pop and rock 'n' roll acts such as the Beach Boys, has itself become iconic: battered leather jackets, canvas sneakers, ripped tight jeans, and a distinctive haircut that combined shoulder-length hair with a daring fringe. All band members adopted the surname Ramone, presumably as an ironic homage to "the schmaltzy sibling groups of the 60s and early 70s—the Osmonds, the Partridge Family and the Jackson Five," as Bill Osgerby explains (163).⁴

The Ramones created an almost caricatural image for themselves that reflected an ironic pastiche of different elements of rock 'n' roll culture and the hackneyed clichés of teenage rebellion as portrayed in countless 1950s and 60s B-movies.⁵ The Ramones represented a kind of cultural backwardness, an anti-modern, in part anti-urban attitude, and a sick society. They appeared to have emerged from the trenches of what is now referred to as 'trash culture.' Looking washed-up, unhealthy, poor, and uneducated, like 'white trash,' they represented the low end of society.⁶ This set them apart from the 'artsy,' Warholian, left-wing intellectualism of their more sophisticated contemporaries such as Patti Smith, the Talking Heads, and Television. The Ramones' musical style is best described as inhumanly fast, primitive rock 'n' roll, topped off with incredibly catchy pop melodies, a sound that would become the hallmark of American punk rock.

Osgerby identifies early onsets of punk in the U.S. in "the artistic vanguard that formed around Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground—a milieu that

⁴ It is probably no coincidence that the name 'Ramone' was also "an alias used by Paul McCartney in his early Beatles days" (Osgerby in Sabin 163).

⁵ Appropriately enough, the Ramones were featured in the 1979 musical comedy film *Rock 'N' Roll High School*.

⁶ Morrissey affectionately describes the Ramones as "all trashcan-in-the-sun New York" (112). About the life-changing experience of seeing the Ramones perform live in his native Manchester he writes, "The Ramones are models of ill-health, playing backwards, human remains washed ashore, so much condensed into a single presentation, and it is outstanding" (ibid.).

bore later fruit in the glam-trash of the New York Dolls and Wayne County” (155). He concedes, however, that the Ramones were also greatly influenced by “a pop heritage that encompassed the bobby-soxed girl groups of the 1950s and the rough-and-ready surf, ‘frat rock’ and garage bands of the early to mid 60s” (Osgerby 155). Post-WWII America was obsessed with the idea of idyllic suburban life, “a world of hedonistic leisure and conspicuous consumption,” as Osgerby puts it (155). This world spawned a “‘teenage’ mythology [...] from the matrix of profound economic and social changes in white, middle-class life after 1945” (Osgerby 155). Osgerby goes on to explain that “[t]he myths of abundant teenage fun epitomized the ideals of the American consumer lifestyle—and it was these myths that 70s punk would disinter and reconstitute as camp bricolage” (155). In other words, suburbanism and the clichés of white middle-class teenage rebellion were integral to the forging of American punk.⁷

According to Osgerby, “[t]he growing prosperity of white suburbia sustained not only a flourishing commercial youth market, but also a range of new youth cultures and subcultures—in particular, a wide array of grassroots music-making cultures that were the progenitors of 70s punk” (157). Growing up in New York’s concrete jungle, the Ramones did not experience the suburban idyll first-hand, but rather through idealized representations in movies and magazines. Nevertheless, they incorporated the kitsch mythology of suburbia into their aesthetic as a kind of meta-kitsch adaptation, adding a healthy dose of black humor and social critique. Consider, for instance, their songs “Rockaway Beach” (1977) and “The KKK Took My Baby Away” (1981):

Rockaway Beach

Chewing out a rhythm on my bubble gum
The sun is out and I want some
It’s not hard, not far to reach
We can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach

Up on the roof, out on the street
Down in the playground the hot concrete
Bus ride is too slow
They blast out the disco on the radio

Rock—Rock—Rockaway Beach
Rock—Rock—Rockaway Beach
Rock—Rock—Rockaway Beach

We can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach

It’s not hard, not far to reach
We can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach

[...] (1-14)

⁷ In the UK, where punk was more of an inner-city working-class phenomenon, this wasn’t the case.

The KKK Took My Baby Away

She went away for the holidays
 Said she's going to LA
 But she never got there
 She never got there
 She never got there, they say, yeah

The KKK took my baby away
 They took her away, away from me
 The KKK took my baby away, away from me

[...] (1-8)

In both songs, clichéd rock 'n' roll lingo is used semi-ironically, highlighting its clichéd-ness. Presented in implied quotation marks, that is, in the form of meta-aesthetic representations within the ironizing framework of the Ramones' self-conscious (anti-)art, expressions such as 'my baby,' 'yeah, yeah, yeah,' and '[let's] rock' come with an extra layer of meaning on top of and in reference to their original usages (when we encounter them in a mainstream pop song, for instance). The Ramones took these lightsome, sirupy, life-affirming expressions and presented them in a context in which they seemed oddly out of place—the punk attitude is, after all, one of negation and rejection rather than joyous affirmation—thus ironizing them. In the context of a Ramones song, these expressions should be seen as signifiers signifying signifiers and the process of signification itself. They derive their meaning in part from the fact that they have been used *ad nauseam* in countless rock and 'bubblegum' pop songs, and it is clear that they no longer mean what they used to mean now that they have been transplanted into this new context (punk). In other words, the Ramones played with these signifiers and their original meanings, thus creating new meanings for them and presenting them as clichés. What is more, the Ramones' twisted use of such familiar signifiers—an act of defamiliarization—highlights the processes by which semantic meaning is construed, which is partly contextual and partly intertextual. Looked at in that light, the Ramones were not a rock 'n' roll band in the traditional sense. Rather, they *performed* rock 'n' roll with quotation marks around their performances in the sense that they used its hackneyed clichés and conventions in a self-conscious, semi-ironic manner. The Ramones' art, then, is best described as a pastiche, which applies not just to their lyrics, but also to their appearance and their music.

The Ramones' lyrics are full of playful allusions to rock 'n' roll culture and its clichés, but many of their songs have serious socio-political overtones as well. On some level, "Rockaway Beach," for example, deals with growing up in New York's concrete jungle, while paying parodic homage to groups like the Beach Boys. "Rockaway Beach" was the Ramones' way of making a connection between their Queens reality and the Beach Boys' quasi-mythological "world of hedonistic leisure" (Osgerby, see above). This connection is reflected in the song's chorus, "Rock—Rock—Rockaway Beach,"⁸ for instance, which echoes many clas-

⁸ Consider, for comparison, the Ramones song "Rock 'N' Roll High School" (1979 that features a similar chorus line: "Rock—rock—rock 'n' roll high school.")

sic rock 'n' roll tunes, e.g., "Rock, Rock, Rock" by Jimmy Cavallo & His House Rockers. But what sounds like a song about harmless beach fun is actually a song about how the band came to terms with feeling trapped in their claustrophobic microcosm of Queens. In a similar vein, "The KKK Took My Baby Away," which is an ingenious piece of satire, addressed the problem of racism in America. Its catchy, lightsome chorus, with its internal rhyme and its quadruple consonance, adheres to the conventions of rock 'n' roll while expressing a serious concern. Rhythmically and phonetically, the acronym 'KKK' works in much the same way as the frequently used slogan 'rock, rock, rock,' for instance, but semantically they could not be more different.

These examples suggest that it is not just the content but also the form that makes the Ramones' lyrics and music interesting for academic analysis. Artistic categories such as 'trash' and 'camp' are helpful here. Considering that New York's 1960s and 70s avant-garde art and music scenes were highly intellectualized, the Ramones' approach could be characterized as a deliberate "elevation of style over content (and surface over depth)" (Hopps 105) in order to "dethrone the serious," as Susan Sontag put it in her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (qtd. in Hopps 105). Camp art has a way of pointing to its own artfulness, inviting onlookers to see through the charade as a part of the act. It highlights the aforementioned quotation marks around the performance.⁹ The Ramones epitomized what Sontag called "The ultimate Camp statement," which is "good because it's awful" (ibid.). Joey Ramone may now be considered a great singer and Johnny a highly influential guitarist, but the former's nasal vocals and kitsch lyrics and the latter's three-chord, all-down-strokes guitar playing were the opposite of what was commonly regarded as sophisticated craft at the time.

Like the Ramones, the Sex Pistols and other early punk bands flaunted their below-average musicianship and their lack of taste. The difference was that the Ramones mainly looked to the shoals of America's pop-cultural past for aesthetic inspiration, while the Sex Pistols tried to cultivate a futuristic and dystopian aesthetic, which utilized items of bondage fashion, i.e., symbols of deviant sexual behavior, and references to radical politics. Aesthetically, sexual 'perversion' played an especially important role in early punk. The New York Dolls, who were an American precursor to the Sex Pistols, even performed in full drag as transsexual prostitutes. Gavin Hopps describes the New York Dolls as a "singularly disturbing band, whose sublime disregard for taste meant that they didn't fit in with anything, but were assertive in not fitting in" (191). Merely by existing they consistently questioned traditional gender roles and established categories of sexuality. They looked like transvestites, like cross-dressing male prostitutes, but they were straight. They wore women's clothes, but they were not effeminate. The Ramones, by contrast, looked and sounded like a caricature of a traditional rock band. A song like "53rd and 3rd," however, which addresses male prostitution from a first-person perspective, links them to their aforementioned contemporaries' symbolic

⁹ "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (Sontag "Note on 'Camp'").

celebration of sexual ‘deviancy.’ The song was written by bassist Dee Dee Ramone, allegedly speaking from personal experience. Here is the chorus:

53rd and 3rd
 Standing on the street
 53rd and 3rd
 I’m trying to turn a trick

 53rd and 3rd
 You’re the one they never pick
 53rd and 3rd
 Don’t it make you feel sick? (1-12)

In slang, to ‘turn tricks’ means to work as a prostitute, and the corner of 53rd street and 3rd avenue in New York City used to be known as a hotspot for male prostitution (cf. Fields, *Gramaglia*). The “53rd and 3rd” lyrics are a first-person account of the hardships of the profession. In the last third of the song, the lyrics (interestingly, sung not by vocalist Joey, but by the author himself) take a sinister turn as the speaker admits to a violent crime:

Then I took out my razor blade
 Then I did what God forbade
 Now the cops are after me
 But I proved that I’m no sissy (17-20)

The last line is especially important as it does away with the all too common misperception that ‘queer’ men are sub-masculine, hyper-effeminate, or easily victimized. It reveals how gay hustlers asserted themselves on the streets of New York City. Can we imagine any mainstream rock or pop group addressing such a culturally taboo issue, let alone from a first-person perspective? In punk, however, this kind of subversive subject matter is nothing unusual.

What the Ramones did lyrically, the New York Dolls did visually. They were a tough and hard-rocking band of straight men, but they imitated the ‘queer’ look of cross-dressing male prostitutes, which was completely unheard of. Morrissey describes his heroes as follows: “The Dolls were actually the toughest band on earth, and their appearance proved it. [...] Their chosen name, the New York Dolls, was as provocative and inflamed as being called the New York Fags” (71, 73). It seems safe to say that one of the things that early punk can rightly take credit for is being among the first popular art forms to criticize and deconstruct the heteronormative categories of sexuality and gender.

Punk inherently challenges established socio-cultural norms. As these norms are typically produced and reinforced by the dominant culture, it is necessary to consider punk in the context of power relations. Punk is a form of cultural heresy, a rejection of dominant values; therefore, U.S. culture has played a critical role in the development of American punk as its constitutive outside/other. Naturally, this influence of mainstream American culture has been smaller on the other side of the Atlantic, which explains many of the differences between British and American punk. At least since the internet, however, the Atlantic Ocean has shrunk considerably, so to speak. What’s more, there have always been anti-American sen-

timents in British punk.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it seems safe to speak of two distinguishable, cross-pollinating punk traditions. It is moreover important to acknowledge that punk is not only a culture of negation but also a unique cultural enterprise in its own right. As a subversive culture, punk has proven to be highly innovative and productive. Some of its practices have even become mainstream. The large-scale, non-commercial sharing of punk music, for example, predates the internet and can be seen as the blueprint for modern online file sharing.

However, it was not until the Dead Kennedys entered the scene in the late 1970s that U.S. punk became overtly political in such an eloquent and sophisticated form. The band was based in the San Francisco area and played their own unique style of punk rock, incorporating jingly surf rock and jazz elements. Singer and frontman Jello Biafra delivered his mordantly satirical lyrics with great theatricality. Biafra has this to say about the formation of the band and his personal approach to songwriting:

I formed Dead Kennedys not out of guilt and how bad the world was. I formed DK because I wanted to rock! I wanted to be in a band. I'd wanted to do that since I was a small child. It occurred to me from the beginning, why not make the lyrics interesting? I never liked the fake romanticism, the phoney bullshit romance lyrics. I never liked the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll ones unless they were particularly witty or funny, otherwise they were just empty to me. (Biafra)

Perhaps the Dead Kennedys' most noted song is "California Über Alles" (1979). The lyrics deal with the political situation in California during Democratic Governor Jerry Brown's first period of office (1975-1983).¹¹ The opening couplet runs, "I am Governor Jerry Brown / My aura smiles and never frowns," explicitly establishing Brown as the song's fictional speaker. The song paints a dystopian scenario of Orwellian proportions (note below the explicit references to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "Big Bro" and "Now it is 1984" in lines 15 and 20), in which Brown, with the help of an infantry of "Zen fascists"¹² and "the suede denim secret police" (lines 10, 22), plans to form a totalitarian dictatorship with a hippie face. The song criticizes California's insipid (cf. line 17), post-hippie middle-class populace, which has replaced the original hippie movement's radical revolutionary spirit with complacency and "alternative" consumerism.

The quasi-German title/chorus and a number of other passages make direct reference to Nazi Germany (e. g., "[Deutschland] Über alles," "master race") and the Holocaust (e. g., "Come quietly to the camp," "it's only a shower," and "You'd look nice as a drawstring lamp"). The song utilizes these references as a form of

¹⁰ Consider, for instance, a song like "Fuck the U.S.A." (1982) by the Exploited from Scotland: "The dollar is the language that they all speak / they don't really bother about the radiation leak" (excerpt).

¹¹ As the 34th and 39th Governor of California, Brown succeeded both Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger in office.

¹² In his 1997 book *Zen at War*, the historian Brian Victoria points out that there is a bothersome historical connection between Zen Buddhism and Japanese nationalism/militarism. "Zen fascists" may be a reference to this historical fact. It is also a good example of how something that is thought of as inherently peaceful—be it Buddhism or hippie culture—can be exploited for repressive ends.

satirical hyperbole to highlight Brown's alleged fascistic leanings¹³ and to criticize the naïve notion that it "can't happen here" (line 14). Somewhat crudely, "California Über Alles" draws parallels between the political climate in the U.S. in 1979 and Germany in the 1930s. Rhetorically, this comparison may be effective, but it is not particularly original or clever. It is, in fact, even somewhat problematic, as the author does not seem to take into account the historical singularity of the Holocaust. If anything, he seems to relativize it by showing a great deal of insensitivity towards its millions of victims. The lyrics must therefore also be considered in the context of the debate about the sensationalist exploitation of the Holocaust in popular culture. Here is a representative excerpt:

I am Governor Jerry Brown
 My aura smiles and never frowns
 Soon I will be president...
 Carter Power will soon go away
 I will be Führer one day
 I will command all of you
 Your kids will meditate in school

California Über Alles
 Über Alles California
 Zen fascists will control you
 100 % natural
 You will jog for the master race
 And always wear the happy face
 Close your eyes, can't happen here
 Big Bro' on white horse is near
 The hippies won't come back you say
 Mellow out or you will pay
 California Über Alles
 Über Alles California
 Now it is 1984
 Knock knock at your front door
 It's the suede denim secret police
 They have come for your uncool niece
 Come quietly to the camp
 You'd look nice as a drawstring lamp
 Don't you worry, it's only a shower
 For your clothes here's a pretty flower

[...] (1-27)

The Bay Area quartet did not need controversial lyrics like these in order to make a strong statement, as Brian D. of the CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collec-

¹³ In later (live) versions of the song, Brown was replaced by Ronald Regan and, more recently, by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Biafra calls these alternative versions "update[s]" (pers. int.). The singer still performs the song live when he gigs with his current band, the Guantanamo School of Medicine. "I want to do 'California Über Alles' now," he says, "because people still love to hear it live—it's a good piece of music." He adds, "Schwarzenegger is not the Governor anymore. He finally quit. Even the Terminator and all those muscles couldn't tame the sheer lunacy of today's Republican legislation" (pers. int.).

tive, a decentralized anarchist collective with ties to the international punk community, explains:

The Kennedy family is like this point of reference for all of America, American culture, American identity, and all they had to do was to put the word 'dead' in front of the name to be like, 'your idols are dead; they're physically dead, they're ideologically dead. Your whole country is based on this bullshit dream that has destroyed itself.' (pers. int.)

The alias Jello Biafra (Eric Reed Boucher) is a telling name consisting of the brand Jell-O, a sugary gelatin dessert and an epitome of modern America's consumer and throw-away mentality, and the name of a secessionist state in south-east Nigeria beset with war and famine. The statement is clear: most Americans live in a consumerist bubble, shielded from the horrors of poverty and ignorant to the fact that affluence and poverty are two sides of the same coin.

The next important step in the evolution of American punk was a phenomenon called 'hardcore punk' (or 'hardcore' for short).¹⁴ If the Ramones' music was a subversive articulation of a discontent that was smoldering under the idyllic surface of suburban American life, then hardcore was its eruption. Around 1980, only a few years after the initial punk explosion, a handful of young punk musicians who saw great potential in the punk idea but did not like the direction in which the community was headed (drug abuse, nihilism, commercialization, etc.) got together, picked up the pieces, and started something new based on what they regarded as the hard core values of punk. Hardcore was the first and probably the most significant of the many 'revisions' that U.S. punk has undergone since then. Hardcore music was even faster and more aggressive than 'regular' punk rock and more to the point lyrically. Most of it sounded tuneless and vitriolic, but the original message of hardcore was, by and large, a positive, optimistic, and life-affirming one.

Ronald Reagan's victory in the presidential election of 1980 was certainly a catalyst for the aesthetic hardening of punk in America that led to the inception of hardcore. The punks despised Reagan's conservatism and positioned themselves in opposition to the ideology he represented. The Ramones' pop sensibility no longer captured this defiant zeitgeist. "Punk rockers loved to hate Reagan worldwide. Songs were written, posters were made, signs were raised and oranges were hurled," Black Flag singer Henry Rollins recalls (cf. Rachman, Blush). Vince Bondi of the band Articles of Faith (1981-1985) gives the following account of those years:

In the early '80s there was this sense of re-establishing 'the order,' the white man, the Ronald Reagan white man order is coming back. You know, you had that wimp Jimmy Carter talking about peace and human rights and all this other shit and you had the feminists and the negroes and they're all getting uppity on us, right? So we're gonna re-institute order here, right? And so the whole country goes into this really puerile '50s fantasy where they dress in these cardigan sweaters and we were just like, 'Fuck you!

¹⁴ I should clarify that to think of the evolution of punk as linear is a fallacy. Rather, we should think of it as a family tree, like the evolution of species, with many different branches. The phenomena described here are all very close to the trunk of said tree as they occurred relatively early on in the history of the movement and have therefore been of great importance for a huge number of later developments. Hardcore is a variety of punk that started as an attempt to re-capture the essence of the punk idea when it seemed in danger of being watered down. To a certain extent, the terms 'hardcore' and 'punk' are synonymous and can, in most cases, be used interchangeably.

Not us. You can take that and shove it up your ass.' [...] There wasn't any organized Left in the United States in the 1980s. There *was* hardcore. And again, you know, as limited as it was, it was a manifestation of a communalist aspect, of openness to humanity, of a disdain for authority that's in the best tradition of radicalism. So, if you're looking for radicalism in the 1980s, you should look at hardcore. (*American Hardcore*)

One key group of early hardcore was a young band from Washington, D. C., called Minor Threat (1980-1983), who bashed out their songs with utmost intensity, evoking a sense of youthful urgency, passion, and immediacy—or as their singer Ian MacKaye once put it, “I want to say exactly what’s on my mind, and I want to do it in 30 seconds” (*American Hardcore*).

Minor Threat had a message, and that message they took seriously. Abstinence from intoxication was a crucial part of that message as the group had identified recreational drug use as one of the things that had blunted punk’s radical edge. Minor Threat advocated for an informed, independent lifestyle, which to them also included abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and “abusive, quest-oriented, manipulative sex” (MacKaye in Kuhn 35). “I liked the rebellion [of punk],” MacKaye recalls, “but I always thought that our thing could be stronger without the drugs” (qtd. in Andersen & Jenkins 22). The following two songs, which have often been misinterpreted as dogmatic sets of rules, addressed this issue:

Straight Edge

I'm a person just like you
But I've got better things to do
Than sit around and fuck my head
Hang out with the living dead
Snort white shit up my nose
Pass out at the shows
I don't even think about speed
That's something I just don't need

I've got the straight edge

[...] (1-9)

Out of Step

(I) Don't smoke
Don't drink
Don't fuck
At least I can fucking think

I can't keep up
Can't keep up
Can't keep up
Out of step with the world (1-8)

As an adjective, the term ‘straight edge’ was originally used to refer to punks who did not drink, take drugs, smoke, or engage in the kind of sexual behavior that MacKaye criticizes as “abusive, quest-oriented, manipulative,” but it soon became associated with a movement, first in the U.S., then worldwide. This had

never been intended by straight edge's reluctant 'father' Ian MacKaye: "It's a fact that I have always been on record saying that I was uninterested in a movement and yet that song became really the vowing song for what many, many people consider a movement" (pers. int.). MacKaye's inadvertent movement, with its rigid 'rules' and its 'righteous' agenda, started to attract people who seemed to care more about exclusivity than they did about community. The aggressive music and the violent dancing at shows attracted jock-type adolescents who confused being hardcore with being 'hard' and felt that they needed to prove their masculinity by acting tough in the 'pit.' Hardcore became synonymous with toughness and hyper-masculine bravado. Dan Yemin from the popular Philadelphia hardcore punk band Paint It Black sums up the problem well:

I think that aspect of hardcore gives the entire sort of genre a bad name. The violent rituals associated with it, the very masculine parts of hardcore. I think those are kind of embarrassing. I'm all about people dancing and stage-diving and stuff but there is a certain point where it crosses the line from fun into kind of violent and I think it's admittedly kind of hard to monitor where that line is. (pers. int.)

But how was such a grave misunderstanding of MacKaye's simple, straightforward lyrics possible? Was it perhaps their simplicity that—ironically—rendered them prone to misinterpretation? MacKaye seems to think so:

"Straight Edge" was really written about an individual's right to live however they wanted to. So how do you square that with fundamentalist thugs, assaulting people for drinking? You can't, and ultimately what I think I found out was that—and I've used this metaphor before—that if you think of songs, those early songs, I was sewing together clothes that people adopt as uniform. [...] But then, in Fugazi [his later band], by coming into Fugazi, I was really thinking, don't make clothes, make high quality fabric. We're encouraging people to engage with this work so they would actually have to do a little sewing on their own as opposed to just have to put it on, to just take the idea and run with it. (pers. int.)

It did not take long until conservative American Christians discovered straight edge and began to infiltrate the scene.¹⁵ They seemed to confuse MacKaye's refusal to play the clichéd sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll game with chastity and celibacy.¹⁶ The result was an elitist, self-righteous, orthodox, and conservative movement that had very little to do with its rebellious, antiauthoritarian punk roots. Punk and straight edge became two separate cultural entities, not everywhere, but especially in the U.S.A. "The new [straight edge] bands," Craig O'Hara notes, "have become increasingly reactionary, conformist and macho in the last few years.

¹⁵ This problem is addressed in Good Clean Fun's song "Between Christian Rock and a Hard Place" (2006): "I never thought I'd see the day / When church kids chose the hardcore way / And I expected quite a fight: punk rock vs. the Christian right / [...] / The scene is strong and we'll still be here when you're gone."

¹⁶ "I think American culture is deeply dysfunctional about sexuality," says MacKaye (qtd. in Kuhn 35), which he blames on the "very dominant right, religious element in this society" (ibid.). In reaction to this element, "the idea of sex as a rebel act," as MacKaye puts it (ibid.), was born and became synonymous with rock 'n' roll culture: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Minor Threat and their peers, however, rejected rock 'n' roll's primary motto. In doing so, they "went beyond the idea that rebelliousness can only manifest in either self-destruction or the exploitation of others," explains MacKaye (ibid.).

[...] Straight Edge has become a sea of middle class young white men with little interest in rebellion or radical politics” as many straight edgers “have rejected Punk [...] and now have their own subculture within the counterculture” (146-48). There has since been a considerable backlash against this trend within straight edge and hardcore punk culture.¹⁷ One of the main points of criticism has been that sexism and homophobia have found their way into certain parts of the movement. The 1991 Screeching Weasel song “I Wanna Be a Homosexual” addressed this problem in a humorous way:

Call me a faggot, call me a butt-loving, fudge-packing queer
But I don't care 'cause it's the straight in straight edge
That makes me wanna drink a beer
And be a pansy, and be a homo
[...] (1-4)

The aforementioned U.S. punk explosion of 1994 had more to do with the Ramones than with such later developments. The American ‘punk revival,’ or “punk renaissance,” as Bad Religion guitarist and Epitaph Records boss Brett Gurewitz has termed it (*Punk's Not Dead*), made the punk rock sound and the corresponding look popular with a new mainstream audience. The enormous media attention these ‘neo-punk’ bands suddenly got considerably distorted punk’s historical trajectory. The public was left with the impression that there had been a huge gap between the late 1970s and the 1990s. The common perception was that punk was virtually non-existent throughout the 1980s, which as we have already seen, was not the case at all. As a matter of fact, almost all of the bands that came to prominence in 1994 had been around for over a decade.¹⁸

Bad Religion’s 1988 album, *Suffer*, is widely considered to have been the precursor of the melodic sound that would define American-punk rock in the 1990s. To quote NOFX frontman and Fat Wreck Chords owner ‘Fat’ Mike Burkett, “Very few good records came out from ’85 to ’89—of course with the exception of Bad Religion’s *Suffer*. That’s what invigorated our whole scene; that’s what changed everything” (*One Nine Nine Four*).

Another important forerunner to this ‘new wave’ of U.S. punk rock was a band who formed in 1978 and called themselves the Descendents. They were significant because they represented the ‘missing’ link between the aggressive 80s hardcore sound and the more melodic sound of the 90s. Zach Furness writes this about them:

[H]undreds of bands routinely cite their angsty, love-scorned, caffeine-fueled melodies as part of the bedrock upon which ‘pop punk’ was built. [...] [Milo] Aukerman’s clever wit and catchy vocals helped the band carve out a niche that lay somewhere between the aggressive hardcore musicianship of Black Flag, the toilet humor of a moody 15-year old Ramones fan, and the pop sensibility of 60s rock bands that long permeated the Southern California beach town culture from which the band emerged. (49)

¹⁷ Consider, for instance, D.S.-13’s “If This Is Hardcore” (2000): “If this is hardcore, I’d rather be punk/If this is straight edge, I’d rather be drunk.”

¹⁸ Almost all of them hailed from California.

Locality is a key factor in understanding the Descendents' significance and the specific scene that shaped them and which they, in turn, helped shape. "Southern California beach town culture" sums up what American punk rock, circa 1994, was all about—which is to say, this was the aspect that the media focused on. The more unpleasant sides of the Southern California's milieu (e.g., drug abuse and violence) were ignored and the more idyllic aspects foregrounded. It certainly makes sense that the Descendents achieved their greatest commercial success around that time. Their 1996 album *Everything Sucks* was the Descendents' first release to chart. Drummer Bill Stevenson suspects that their late success may have had something to do with their lyrics, specifically the fact that they "align[ed] really closely with the kind of skateboarder, slacker, hippie-yuppie-punker fashion" that dominated the scene at the time (qtd. in Arnold 103). Here is a short excerpt from the album's title track, "Everything Sux":

Got up on the wrong side of life this morning.
 Nothin' today is gonna go my way.
 Horoscope told me lies this morning.
 I don't think anything's gonna be okay.

Today!
 Everything sucks today! (1-6)

The basic punk rock sound—distorted guitars, simple riffs, catchy tunes—had first reached mainstream America by a different route, namely through the Seattle 'grunge' band Nirvana (1987-1994). The unprecedented mainstream success of their 1991 hit album, *Nevermind*, opened the gates for punk-sounding music, and an armada of bands who, like Nirvana, had their roots in the punk culture, marched right through them. Not only did they bring the punk rock sound to the masses, but they also made the never-mind attitude and the 'grungy' look of pioneering punk bands such as the Ramones and the Sex Pistols popular among young people. Singer Kurt Cobain's lyrics dealt with emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, lethargy, and pathological boredom. It seems fair to say that Nirvana and the movement they spearheaded reinvented the American punk archetype of the bored suburban teenager. This was a crucial precondition for the 1994 punk revival. "The revival of interest in punk in the late [*sic*] nineties," Osgerby explains, "moreover, saw a 'new wave' of bands (Green Day, the Offspring, Pennywise) elaborating a pastiche on the teen mythology similar to—indeed fundamentally indebted to—the earlier camp ironies of the Dictators, the Ramones and the Dickies" (166). Many of these 'new' punk bands were also affiliated with California's surf and skateboard scene (cf. *One Nine Nine Four*). They represented an apolitical model of teenage rebellion based on the reckless lifestyle of this culture.

Following Nirvana—the band ended tragically with Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994—Green Day (formed in 1987) was the first "straight-up punk band," as Pennywise guitarist Fletcher Dragge put it (*One Nine Nine Four*), who broke into the mainstream. It is quite peculiar that up until Green Day the media avoided using the term 'punk.' Instead, Nirvana's music was dubbed 'grunge.' This goes to show how unpopular punk was prior to punk's 'big break' in the mid-90s. It could be argued that Green Day's success was no coincidence as the band constituted a near-

perfect transition from the grunge into the ‘neo-punk’ era. Their lyrics seemed to speak to the same suburban teenagers whose lives were “not that bad, but not that good either,” to quote Tom DeLonge from the famous pop-punk band Blink 182 (*One Nine Nine Four*). By way of example, let us take a brief look at some of the lyrics to Green Day’s first hit single “Longview” (1994):

Sit around and watch the tube but, nothing’s on [*sic*]
 Change the channels for an hour or two
 Twiddle my thumbs just for a bit
 I’m sick of all the same old shit
 In a house with unlocked doors
 And I’m fucking lazy

 Bite my lip and close my eyes
 Take me away to paradise
 I’m so damn bored I’m going BLIND!!!
 And I smell like shit

 [...] (1-10)

Similarly to grunge, much of this ‘new’ punk music was written by and for young people who regarded themselves as misfits and failures in what Bad Religion had termed the “land of competition,” by which they meant the U.S. in general and their native Southern California in particular.¹⁹ According to many songs, these ‘kids’ felt inept, alienated, disenfranchised, and dysfunctional. Their songs were anthems for ‘underachievers’ and ‘slackers.’ At their core, however, they conveyed a positive, empowering, and inspiring message: *it’s okay to be different; it’s okay not to feel happy all the time; it’s okay to be yourself; it’s okay to fail*. In an interview conducted at the time, Green Day’s singer-guitarist Billie Joe Armstrong described his songs as “songs about yet another generation falling down the chutes; songs for people who have the same ideas as I do that will maybe help some of them get up off their asses and show them another world” (qtd. in Arnold 82).

The fact that a song like “Longview” became such a huge commercial success,²⁰ particularly in the U.S., is stranger than it may at first seem. Most mainstream American rock music glorifies and idealizes the ‘American way of life’ and reinforces people’s faith in the ‘American dream,’ howsoever clichéd and dated these concepts may seem, perpetuating the narrative of limitless opportunity, healthy competition, heteronormativity, and superficial beauty. Punk does the opposite. In their song “Coffee Black” (1999), for example, the Gainesville, FL band As Friends Rust expresses their opposition to the American value system as follows: “We are the ugly. We are the gay. Impoverished, effeminate, and overweight.” By rejecting the maxims of physical perfection, financial success, and heteronor-

¹⁹ Cf. “Land of Competition” from Bad Religion’s 1988 album *Suffer*: “See there’s a girl who’s afraid of the world so she stays at home / Next there’s a boy who seems so lost in his joy ... he’s all alone / The camera’s on them / They’re in the land of competition / [...] / Southern California will destroy them.”

²⁰ Another good example is the song “Self Esteem” by the Offspring (1994): “All this rejection’s got me so low / If she keeps it up I just might tell her so / [...] / I may be dumb / But I’m not a dweeb / I’m just a sucker with no self-esteem.”

maturity, punk put itself in opposition to the corporate rock circus as well as to society at large. In the mid-1990s, however, punk ‘made it to the top’ after all. “I’m surprised it took as long as it did with punk,” says Jello Biafra (*Punk’s Not Dead*). “Part of the reason, I guess, was because the music was so intense it delayed the inevitable mass embrace and I figured it was going to happen sooner or later—I mean, the music was too good” (ibid.). However, the unprecedented success of the big ‘neo-punk’ groups of 1994 naturally caused a great deal of controversy in hardcore and punk circles. The question that proved most controversial was this: Can a band that happily plays the game of corporate rock, who appears on MTV and plays big arenas, remain credible as a punk band, given that punk is inherently anti-establishment? And what about independence? What about counterculture? These were the questions that bothered many punks at the time and continue to do so. Greg Graffin from Bad Religion, however, regards the commercialization of punk as a blessing. He refers to it as the “democratization of punk,” by which he means that “punk left the urban center and you could now find it in the malls throughout America, throughout the world” (*One Nine Nine Four*). His bandmate Brett Gurewitz agrees: “Punk rock claims to be a populist movement, and if it’s a populist movement, then let’s put it on every radio station. The ‘punk rock is scared’ thing is dangerous, because punk rock cannot be about elitism” (*One Nine Nine Four*).

Needless to say, people from the community’s more radical wing, whose focus is, above all, on building independent countercultural networks,²¹ a viable alternative to capitalist America, would consider such statements naïve. After all, the medium is at least part of the message. Therefore, commercial punk rock tends to lack the countercultural edginess of the underground bands. This became a burning issue in the 1990s. The big major labels were skimming off the more digestible, palatable bands of the American—which is to say, mostly Californian—punk pool, allowing them to sell a defused version of punk rebellion to teenagers, while the heavier and darker elements sank to the bottom. In an article in *The Washington Times Communities*, Russ Rankin from the SoCal punk band Good Riddance (1986-2007, 2012-present) describes how the media-created teenage mythology of “an idyllic beachside setting, with bands surfing, skateboarding, and partying” clashed with the bleak reality of the California punk scene in the 1990s because “[s]imilar to a decade earlier, the subculture came with the drugs, and with those came the attendant crime and antisocial behavior”:

Fans around the world, many of whom have never visited California, carry a curious, fantastical image of the place, based mostly on their interpretation of bands’ styles and lyrics. For those of us who grew up here, the true story is very different, and much darker. When punk first began happening in Los Angeles and Hollywood, it grew out of the art scene. Drugs were everywhere, as was a nascent, almost casual disregard for adulthood.

²¹ In his 2003 essay “The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture,” Dylan Clarke offers an excellent survey of punk’s radical political approach to subculture. He pointed out, for instance, that punk, “[h]aving been forced, as it were, out of a costume and music-based clique, [...] is evolving into one of the most powerful political forces in North America and Europe, making its presence felt in the Battle of Seattle (1999), Quebec City (2001), EarthFirst!, Reclaim the Streets, and in variety of anti-corporate movements.”

Live fast, die young was not only a cool-sounding catch phrase, it was *raison d'être* for an entire subculture. [...] Young people latched onto the scene because it resonated with their general antipathy, not because it was particularly fun or recreational. (Rankin)

American punk is inherently—be it explicitly or implicitly—critical of American culture. In the America of the early 1970s, an era known for its extravagant, glamorous rock acts, the rebel spirit of rock 'n' roll found its most establishment-rocking manifestation in the back-to-basics approach of proto-punk bands such as the Stooges, who paved the way for punk. The New York Dolls' camp pose can be seen as a parody of the dressed-up-to-the-hilt rock stars of the era. The Stooge's Iggy Pop has described their music as "white suburban delinquent music" (*The South Bank Show*). 'Suburban' is the keyword here²² as suburbia became the chief breeding ground for punk in the U.S.²³

Early American punk dismissed the idyllic world of suburbia as phoney and saw in it a manifestation of a obsequious mentality as well as a perpetuation of an illusory charade meant to distract the American people from the fact that the U.S. government was trampling on human rights both domestically and overseas and that drugs, alcohol, poverty, and violence were ruining countless lives across the country. The 1980s were also a time when the Cold War was still underway, posing a threat to civilization itself. Having emerged from such conditions, U.S. punk never quite "bought" the American ideal of the nuclear family in suburban white-picket-fence bliss. We may get the impression that some American punk bands have contributed to the romanticization of suburban life, but only if we fail to see the irony in their representations of this lifestyle, which contain a strong critical element. The Descendents' "Rotting Out" encapsulates this critique:

Shove all your problems under the rug
Then you wonder where the smell came from
Rotting out from the inside
This is your fucked up family
So many minds that nobody ever speaks
Rotting out from the inside ... rotting out
Nuclear family falling out

Winter forever in this house

They're rotting out from the inside
So put me out of my misery
If it ever happens to me, no

[...] (1-11)

Another good example is the aforementioned As Friends Rust song, "Coffee Black," which launches a full-on attack on the hypocrisy and the bigotry inherent in the society of suburbia:

²² The adjective 'white' is superfluous in this definition given that the world of suburbia has been known to be rather homogeneous, ethnically speaking.

²³ This fact is illustrated in the iconic sleeve art of Bad Religion's seminal 1988 album, *Suffer*, which shows a burning boy in an anti-crucifix T-shirt (the Bad Religion logo; it is made to look like a prohibition sign) standing on a *The Wonder Years*-like suburban street, his fists clenched. Another example is the title of Strung Out's 1996 album *Suburban Teenage Wasteland Blues*.

You like your coffee black, your neighborhood white,
 Your lights are out at nine o'clock at night.
 Are you afraid of everything,
 Or just the truth?
 [...]

Every step that you take forward,
 Is a generation back for us.
 We are the ugly.
 We are the gay.
 Impoverished, effeminate, and overweight.
 Take your consumer culture back from us.
 It's a fucking economic attack on us all.
 And the football season
 Is the only reason
 You stay alive
 In your Prime Time beehive.

Punk has its roots on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Despite continuous cross-fertilization, the two main punk traditions—British and the American—are, as I have demonstrated, nonetheless distinguishable in several respects. The reasons for these differences lie in the different cultural, social, and economic conditions from which punk emerged in these places. In Britain, early punk was mainly a movement of frustrated working-class youths who, living in the high-rise blocks of the big metropolises, were facing a declining economy and rising unemployment, which was reflected in their music, their lyrics, and their appearances. The Sex Pistols and the Clash came from exactly this kind of background, for instance. In the U.S., however, punk has been a middle-class rebellion against the boredom and the phoniness of suburbia, both as a place and as a state of mind. Even the bands that hailed from the big cities, such as the Ramones, carried this rejection of what they identified as a fake idyll in their hearts. By rejecting the norms and values of mainstream American culture, American punk produced something that can be described as an alternative sense of Americanness.

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